DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 090 664 EA 006 115

AUTHOR Olson, Arthur R.
TITLE [Shared Accountability: Profession and Society.]
PUB DATE Mar 74
NOTE 11p.; Speech given at the Annual Conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (29th, Anaheim, California, March 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Accountability; Educational Assessment; Educational Needs; *Educational Objectives; *Effective Teaching; Humanization; Performance Criteria; *School Responsibility; Systems Approach

ABSTRACT

Educational accountability can be defined as the assigning of responsibility for educational outcomes. It has two essential dimensions--access to information about performance and the ability to change those factors thought to be responsible for unsatisfactory performance. While there are necessarily many parties held accountable in the schooling process, the schools themselves and professional educators are expected to bear the major share of responsibility. Schools should communicate to students, parents, and the public the specific objectives they seek and the conditions under which educators must work if these outcomes are to be achieved. To achieve increased accountability in education, educators should follow some logical procedures and develop a list of checkpoints. Careful, dispassionate efforts to identify learning outcomes, develop performance criteria, organize instructional sequences, perform diagnostic evaluations, provide timely feedback and correction, and manage the resources available are necessary to careful, compassionate, and humane teaching. (Document may reproduce poorly.) (Author/DN)

ED 090664

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[Shared Accountability: Profession and Society.]

by

Arthur R. Olson

29th Annual ASCD Convention
Anaheim, California
March 11, 1974

EA 006 115

INTRODUCTION

Thank you Mr. Steiner. Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

The theme of this, the 29th ASCD convention, is "Creating Curricula for Human Futures." In listening in on several of today's action labs and special sessions, I heard a number of participants state with both passion and commitment, that the first step that must be taken in addressing this theme is for educators to discover themselves. That is, we must arrive at an understanding of our own purposes, an understanding of the methods and means we use to try to achieve our purposes, an understanding of the relationships between our purposes (methods and means) and those of others, and an understanding of the effects our actions have on others and the effects theirs have upon us. All of this must be done before we set out to create the curricula for tomorrow. For, it makes no difference what role you have in the education of children and youth. If you intend to have a predictable and positive influence then you had better know why you do what you do and what difference it makes--if any. In other words, each one of us must hold himself or herself accountable for what we do as individuals and as members of organizations as we create and sustain students' educational environments.

In this context, educational accountability is as specific as the individual and as broad as the environment within which schools function.

What I would like to do this evening -- and what I think might prove useful to you -- is to share with you some of my thoughts and observations on the concept or notion of educational accountability so that you, hopefully, may have a better understanding of a much-used but also much abused and confused concept. My purpose, put simply, will be to help you place the concept in proper perspective.

Most often the concept of accountability is raised or presented by posing the question, "Should the teacher be held accountable?" My answer, in a simple and straight-forward manner, is, "yes, certainly." But I would submit that that is not the real question. The real question, which largely has gone unanswered, has four parts, namely: What do we mean by accountability? -- Who should be held accountable? -- For what should they be held accountable? -- and, How is increased accountability to be achieved?

Let me turn first to the question, "What do we mean by accountability?" for it is in the definition -- or lack of definition -- of this term that our troubles begin. The word accountability has become a highly-charged term emotionally and, I think, has now taken on a prejorative connotation, perhaps because it is too often used to cover a multitude of sins and virtues, too often ill-defined or not defined at all, and has, in essence, become for many a new buzz-word added to the jargon of education. One can almost guarantee that its use in any educational gathering will prompt immediate reaction and debate characterized, unfortunately, more by polemics and rhetoric than by rigorous thought and talk

about the educational issues involved.

Contrary to what you may think, I would not define accountability as being equal to teacher evaluation. Nor does accountability equal statewide assessment programs. Nor does accountability equal management by objectives. Nor does accountability equal program budgeting and evaluation. Nor does accountability equal performance contracting. Each of these elements, and many others, may be steps by which increased accountability is achieved, but no one of them -- in and of itself -- necessarily produces accountability.

How, then, do I define accountability? Put simply, I would define it as the assigning of responsibility for educational outcomes. And, in my definition, I would not limit the assigning of responsibility to classroom teachers alone. All parties in the schooling process -- students, parents, teachers, supervisors, administrators, board members, tax payers, legislators, the state executive office, the state education agency, the teacher-training institutions -- have specific roles and are, or should be, assigned specific responsibilities in the shared efforts to achieve the desired outcomes of the schooling process.

Accountability, as I have defined it, has two essential dimensions -- both of which must be present if an accountability relationship is to be established between any two individuals, groups, or agencies. The first is: access to information about performance -- whether it be the performance of a pupil, a teacher, an administrator, a local school board, a state agency, a teacher-training institution, or a state legislature. The second dimension is: The ability to change those factors thought to be responsible for unsatisfactory performance -- in short, the authority or power to alter conditions.

While there are, and have to be, many parties held accountable in the schooling process, the schools themselves, and professional educators, I think, are expected to bear the major share of responsibility -- not all of it, but the major share of it. For it is with that expectation, I think, that our society has established and continues to maintain our public school systems. And this expectation is reflected in one of the basic themes of the present accountability movement, namely: Every student is expected to succeed and the schools have the prime responsibility to make it happen. This view literally "puts the shoe on the other foot" in reference to the traditional outlook in many of our public school systems which puts the burden of responsibility on the student to get what he can from his school experience. It challenges one of the major underlying assumptions of all public schooling and demands, in effect, a guarantee of success in some terms for every student in every educational program.

Before we leave the questions, "What do we mean by accountability?" and "Who should be held accountable?", let me offer two further observations, first, if one is going to deal with the issue of accountability, one should immediately recognize that there are many pieces in the mosaic. An accountability system is just that -- a system, a varied set of procedures and processes involving a host of varied participants and actors. One part or piece does not equal the whole. To focus in on one piece, for example teacher evaluation, to the exclusion of the other pieces not only does damage to the concept but also, I think, seriously distorts the schooling process.

Second, I would submit that the first role and responsibility of any one involved in the current debate over accountability is to define what he or she means -- and doesn't mean -- by the term. If we are to approach the issue in a rational and objective way, then we have a responsibility to clearly define our terms and speak to the issues involved rather than indulge ourselves in lengthy debates laced with polemics and rhetoric and lacking rigorous thought and talk about the vital issue involved -- namely, how can we better provide for the education of all young people? All the participants in the process -- and particularly educators -- have a responsibility to study the concept and its implications in objective fashion and arrive at an understanding of what's meant and what's not meant by the concept before engaging in serious and -- hopefully -- productive debate about the issues involved.

Let's turn now to the question, "What are they to be held accountable for?" -- What is the pupil to be held accountable for? -- The parent? -- The teacher? -- The administrator? -- The school board? -- The state? Here again, I submit that we too often have engaged in rhetoric rather than rigorous thought and talk. We have been satisfied with espousing generalities, broad goals, and philosophical statements with which few would quarrel. We -- and I include educators, parents, and other citizens -- have been unwilling or unable to provide specific and clearly-understood answers to the question, "What is it that schools should do? What is it that schools should be held accountable for?" We generally have failed to provide our constituents with clear, precise, and understandable statements of what we are all about -- of what a parent should expect when he or she entrusts his child to us for thirteen years of public schooling.

In short, I would submit that we have not done a terribly good job of communicating to the student, to the parent, and to the public the specific objectives we are seeking to attain -- the outcomes we are working toward and for which we are prepared to accept responsibility. Nor have we done a very good job of articulating the conditions which must prevail and within which we must work if we are to achieve these outcomes.

And when accountability systems -- most of which require clear and precise statements of objectives -- are advocated and adopted, we become doubly threatened -- for we face the prospect of someone else telling us what the specific objectives ought to be.

Thus, it seems to me that a basic role and responsibility of educators -- and particularly classroom teachers and school administrators -- in the accountability process is to take the initiative and assume a major role in articulating what it is they think the children and young people they serve ought to know and be able to do. Teachers and administrators cannot afford -- nor should they be content -- to relegate this responsibility entirely to others. But they can rest assured, I think, that if they don't assume this responsibility, someone else will. For another central theme of the current accountability movement is increased rationality and precision in specifying the goals and objectives to be reached for in the schooling process.

The final question which I identified is, "How is increased accountability to be achieved?" And it is in this area, I suspect, that we find the major portion of the debate and controversy surrounding the present accountability movement. One reason for this, as I indicated earlier, is that one particular piece or element is espoused to the exclusion of other

pieces or elements, and this is most often done without reference to the larger picture -- without taking into account all of the pieces and elements that must be considered if we are to use the accountability concept in a positive and productive manner.

For example, some propose, in overly simplistic fashion, that accountability will be achieved automatically when we develop and implement teacher evaluation systems -- and, too often, the advocates of such proposals do not bother to ask or address such basic questions as "What are we evaluating teachers against? What is it that can be expected from teachers? To what purposes will be put the results of the evaluations? To discharge teachers? To improve their skills and competencies? Or to assuage our constituencies -- be they parents, taxpayers, or other citizens." And teachers and school administrators, on the other hand, assume what is perceived by the public as a defensive posture and a reluctance to submit to meaningful evaluations. And the debate rages. We in Michigan have only to look as far as Detroit and the recent teacher strike to see an illustration of this.

I have no ready and quick answers to the question of, "How is increased accountability to be achieved?" Contrary to what many may think, the so-called Michigan accountability model does not provide a definitive and precise set of answers. At best, it serves, we think, as a useful frame of reference, as a logical six-step process for addressing the basic issue we face in education, namely, how can we better provide for the education of all young people. The process suggests that one should proceed sequentially through six steps:

1. The identification of common goals
2. The development of performance objectives

3. The assessment of needs

4. The analysis of delivery systems

5. Evaluation of programs

6. Recommendations for improvement

Accountability, as we define it, requires first that we have an answer to the question, "What is it that the schools should do?" The first two steps in the model -- the identification of common goals and the development of performance objectives -- are designed to provide answers to this basic question. The third step in the model -- which calls for an assessment of needs, addresses itself to the question, "Where are we in relation to our goals and objectives?" "What are our unmet needs?" The fourth step calls for an analysis of existing delivery systems or programs, including the exploration of alternatives. The fifth step -- closely linked with step four -- requires the evaluation and testing of existing programs, or newly developed programs, to determine if they are successful in achieving their stated objectives. The sixth step follows logically -- namely, what suggestions and sound recommendations can be made for improving our delivery system so that pupil needs are better met and the schools progress toward the attainment of their goals.

We think this six-step process can be applied and will prove useful at any of several levels, and with any one program or combination of programs. We use it ourselves to look at and deal more rationally with the activities of our own state agency and the several programs we operate in the agency, as well as using it to look at and deal with the entire state educational system. We think it can be useful at the intermediate

district level, at the local district level, at the school level, at the classroom level, and even at the individual pupil level. We think it a useful frame of reference to look at any single program or combination of programs.

While I am not espousing this process per se, I guess I am suggesting that to achieve increased accountability in education we ought to follow some logical procedure, we ought to develop a larger frame of reference or list of checkpoints, if you will, if we are truly interested in improvement. We have to answer, both in general and very specific terms, the question of what it is that schools should do. We have to assess where we are in relation to those goals and objectives. We have to design or redesign programs that will move us toward these goals and objectives. We have to get tough-minded and evaluate whether or not these programs are effective. And we have to act on the information from those evaluations and modify our programs. In short, we have to approach the whole process of educating our young in a much more systematic fashion than we have in the past.

I have, in my remarks this evening, attempted to share with you some of my views and observations about accountability and accountability systems. I know I have not done justice to the topic. I hope that I have set the issue in proper context. I purposefully kept my description of the Michigan six-step accountability process very brief -- both in the interests of time and in anticipation of further discussing it, or any of its aspects in the interaction period, and I would be most happy to expand on some of the specifics during that time.

As a final thought, let me share with you one further observation regarding an oft-repeated criticism that we hear. My experience has been that one who advocates accountability systems in education is immediately

tagged by many as being something of an ogre and lacking totally any humanistic characteristics. The critics of accountability generally allege that all these attempts at rationality, at systematizing the learning process, will somehow reduce education to a mechanistic procedure and remove from it its most vital characteristic -- namely, humaneness and a sense of compassion for other human beings. It sometimes appears, at least to me, that such critics are almost arguing that rigorous thinking is antithetical to the exercise of understanding and compassion in our dealings with the young -- and that to strive for precision in characterizing pupils and their learning process, and in specifying goals and objectives to be reacned for, will somehow produce inhumane teacher behavior. The fact is, I think, that careful, dispassionate efforts to identify learning outcomes, to develop performance criteria, to organize instructional sequences, to perform diagnostic evaluations, to provide timely feedback and correction, and to manage the resources available are all necessary ingredients of careful, compassionate and humane teaching.

As Dr. Sizemore so clearly pointed out last night, educators have the task of making the values which we as individuals espouse those which our institutions sanction in their rules and regulations. Perhaps accountability can be broadly defined as one of the tools which you as educators will use in this effort. In closing, let me say that one thing is sure: if the schools as a major institution are to be humanized, it will not be through haphazard effort.